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INTRODUCTION

For most of the literate world today, the first contact that the Caribbean had with the outside world was on October 12, 1492 CE when Christopher Columbus landed on the island of San Salvador. Historians then paint a picture of Christian European domination and cultural supremacy. In actuality, the history of the Americas and its peoples stretches back over twenty-thousand years. It tells the story of a rich continent with thriving civilizations and talented, organized human beings. It reveals, to the objective reader, tales of beautiful cities, abundant agriculture, linguistic and philosophical achievements, high technology, pyramid building, respect for and development of women, highly developed political structures, and extensive migrations.

Today, very little mention is made of the presence of Muslims in the Caribbean until the 19th century, with the coming of indentured labourers from India, and then in the 20th century, with the arrival of traders from the Middle East. The history of Islam and Muslim people in this region extends back over one thousand years, predating Columbus' contact by six centuries. Despite this, Islam has been written out of the history books of the West, or, in some cases, relegated to the position of a primitive, unsophisticated religion that only motivated its followers to conquer and pillage. This work is an attempt to dispel some of the misconceptions about Islamic history in the Caribbean and North America, and introduce a body of documentation that may help to put the actual achievements and travels of Muslim explorers, merchants and settlers into proper perspective. In using the name "the Americas", I will be looking at the Western Hemisphere, especially North and

Central America, as one area. The present political boundaries were, of course, in early times, irrelevant, and people were not as divided along imaginary borders.

Caribbean Islamic history is rapidly becoming a topic of critical importance to the indigenous peoples of this region, and to the younger generation who yearn for a deeper understanding of their "roots" and of their original societies. In order to establish the pattern of Muslim contact with the Caribbean, and give some structure to the historical documentation of this extensive period, I have divided Muslim contacts into the following four phases: the period of exploration and commerce, the period of slavery, the period of indentured labour and economic migration, and the period of Islamic reawakening and re-connection with the Muslim world.

In this new edition of "Deeper Roots", I have added a section on Islam and the African in America. This short reflection will also help broaden the horizons of this neglected aspect of world history.

It is hoped that this humble attempt can serve both as an overview and a foundation for more extensive research. It is also hoped that the work of those historians, linguists, and archaeologists who preceded us will not have been in vain, but will serve as an inspiration for young researchers and lovers of truth, and a contribution toward the rewriting of the history of our planet. Above all, I pray that this work will be a means of gaining the pleasure of Almighty God, Allah, for surely He is Supreme in wisdom and well acquainted with all affairs.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SETTING

"For thousands of centuries", reads the 1987 edition of *American History: A Survey*, co-authored by three eminent American historians, Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams, and Alan Brinkley, "centuries in which human races were evolving, forming communities, and building the beginnings of national civilizations in Africa, Asia, and Europe - the continents we know as the Americas stood empty of mankind and its works ... The story of this new world ... is a story of the creation of a civilization where none existed."¹ This image, for the ill-informed reader, erases the presence of almost 75 million Native people, mistakenly called Indians by Columbus, who demographers now estimate may have been living in the Americas in 1492 (almost 6 million of them, perhaps in the area of the present-day United States).

The "Palaeo-Indians", as they are known, ancestors of modern American Indians, came primarily from Asia and entered North America by way of the Bering land bridge, a wide corridor of land, now submerged, connecting Siberia and Alaska. From Alaska to the Great Plains of the present United States stretched a kind of passageway which served as a thoroughfare for human beings and the animals that they hunted. Over the following 7,000 years these nomads crossed the Bering bridge and dispersed throughout the length and breadth of the Americas.² This dispersal and the formation of a multitude of societies is one of the most spectacular, untold stories of human history. They found themselves the only inhabitants of one third of the earth's land mass, a vast expanse of ice-covered territories, fertile valleys, mountainous regions, scorching deserts, tropical

rain forests, wind-swept islands, and thousands of miles of sea coast.

On the eve of Columbus' voyages, Native Americans maintained an amazing diversity of languages, greater by far than all of Europe. In 1492, as many as 2,000 separate, mutually unintelligible languages were spoken by the peoples of the Western hemisphere. Of these, approximately 250 were spoken in North America, some 350 in Mexico and central America, and 1,450 more throughout South America. All of the languages were as rich and complex as anywhere else in the world.³

Throughout the Americas, religion served as a binding and structuring factor in society. All nations had a concept of an original creative force, a story of creation, a hierarchy of created beings, and a complex system of interaction with nature and fellow humanity. Because the forms of worship and societies were so diverse, it is not possible in this brief overview to delve into the subtleties of Native American philosophy and culture. Environment was a decisive factor in how each society organized itself and struggled for survival. Let us look briefly at some of the major regions, their people, and some of their achievements.

THE NORTHERN REGION

By 1492, hunters had occupied the entire northern third of North America. They developed a symbiotic relationship with the animals with whom they shared these lands. From the frozen expanses of the Arctic to the plains and mountains of middle Canada, these early Native Americans hunted fish, whales, seal, elk, moose and other northern animals. They adapted the skins, fur, bones, and fat of their animals for a multitude of purposes

in order to survive in the harsh cold climate. Despite the conditions, they generated a highly efficient society of kinship and inter-regional trade. One interesting group of Native people were the "Makah Indians" who inhabited the northern Pacific coastal region of present day Washington state.⁴ Their dress and some of their names closely resemble Muslims of the desert and savannah region of West and North Africa. They would be an interesting topic for cross cultural researchers.⁵

WESTERN NORTH AMERICA

Of all the regions of the Western Hemisphere, western North America distinguishes itself for its vast deserts, broad sweeping country, deep canyons, and long, powerful rivers. This arid land mass is known for sparse vegetation but a wide variety of desert wildlife. The people of this region, the Hohan, the Nunic, the Algic, the Navajos, the Hopi, the Siouian, the Caddoan, the Tanoan, and other smaller confederations developed a variety of semi-desert cultures. On the plains, a nomadic way of life sustained the Native people. In the canyons and high areas, the ruins of walled stone cities can still be seen, testifying to an advanced civilization of highly skilled builders and craftsmen. The dry climate and high rocky areas have retained, for archaeologists and linguists, traces of the early settlements like the Hohokam and the Anasazi ("the old ones"). The people of this region were highly spiritual and their cultures were so diverse that theories of not only a high level of development, but also Pacific contacts, are becoming more and more plausible.

EASTERN NORTH AMERICA

The Native people of the eastern land mass of North America were progenitors of a rich and complex society. Their environment contained mountains, deep woodlands and great lakes. Along with their lasting achievement of living in harmony with nature, they developed, by 1492, an innovative form of political union. Their multi-tribal federation, strengthened by agreements for mutual defence and elaborate rules of democratic order set the stage for the Constitution of the United States of America. They were the Iroquoian, the Algonquian, the Muskogean, the Siouian, and the Caddoan. Their largest city was Cahokia, founded in the area of the present-day St. Louis, Missouri in approximately 700 CE and occupied for nearly 700 years.⁶

THE CIVILIZATIONS OF CENTRAL AMERICA

To the west of the islands on the Meso-American mainland are the remains of the most highly developed societies of the Western Hemisphere. Around 1500 BC, a people called the Olmecs gave birth to a civilization that boasted the existence of urbanism, large populated centres with spaces reserved for temples, palaces, schools, marketplaces, storehouses, and army headquarters; houses for the common people built along well-planned streets, and alleys; complex social, economic, and political organization; extremely precise calendars; glyphic systems of writing; concern for the preservation of memories of the past; guilds of merchants and artisans; and complex

heavy on slopes facing rain-bearing winds from the Atlantic. Pacific-facing slopes are, on average, drier.

The majority of Caribbean people speak Spanish, notably in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans also speak English, the official language of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Jamaica, Trinidad, Bermuda, Belize, Guyana and other past and present British colonies. French and Dutch are officially spoken respectively in the French and Dutch Antilles. There are also many local tongues, especially Afro-Caribbean forms collectively called Creole or Patois.¹²

Contrary to Spanish reports of meeting primitive, animal-like people in the Caribbean region, the Arawaks and Caribs were not docile, ignorant savages or bloodthirsty cannibals, but sensitive human beings, who mastered their environment and became accomplished seamen and highly sophisticated members of a complex society. They developed a series of languages, a high philosophy, medicine, and political order. Their culture was almost totally obliterated by the European conquerors. They are one of the most maligned, misunderstood people in the world.

Notes

¹ Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. (editor), *American in 1492: The World of Indian Peoples Before the Arrival of Columbus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 6.

² *Ibid.*, from the article "The Becoming of the Native: Man in America Before Columbus", N. Scott Momaday, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, from the article, "A Richness of Voices" by Joel Sherzer, 251.

⁴ *Ibid.*, from the article, "People of the Salmon" by Richard D. Daugherty, 49.

⁵ See Appendix 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, from the article "Farmers of the Woodlands", by Petr Nobokov and Dean Snow, 119.

⁷ *Ibid.*, from the article "Men of Maize" by Miguel Leon-Portilla, 158; John Garraty and Peter Gay (editors), *The Columbia History of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 647; and Stuart J. Fiedel, *Prehistory of the Americas* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 260.

⁸ For more information on this debate see: Ivan Van Sertima (editor), *African Presence in Early America* (U.S.A.: The Journal of African Civilizations Ltd., 1987); *idem*, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (New York: Random House, 1977); and Alexander von Wuthenau, *Unexpected Faces in Ancient America* (New York: Crown, 1976).

⁹ *The New Internationalist History of the World* (Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Ltd., no. 196, June 1989), 22.

¹⁰ Due to the cultural, political and economic interdependence of Central America, the Caribbean and the northern countries of South America, examples and data will be referred to from the entire region. Belize, Central America and Guyana, South America are today part of the English-speaking, Caribbean political community.

¹¹ The Diagram Group, *The Atlas of Central America and the Caribbean*, 12, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 66-67.

CHAPTER TWO

INTO THE SEA OF DARKNESS AND FOG

Ancient America was not isolated from the old world as many historians and anthropologists would have us believe. People from both sides of the Atlantic ocean travelled great distances, mingled with each other and exchanged knowledge and products. Long before Columbus became aware of the possibility of land in the west, Muslims, among other people, had made contact with the Americas and had already left an impression on the Native culture.¹³ Knowledge, agricultural products, livestock, metals, and other commercial items were exchanged between the two worlds. Evidence leading to establishing the presence of Muslims in ancient America comes from a number of sculptures, oral traditions, eye-witness reports, artifacts, Arabic documents, coins, and inscriptions. In Meso-American art, we see Africans and Semites in positions of power and prestige, especially in trading communities of Mexico.¹⁴

A report in *Before Columbus* by Cyrus Gordon describes coins found in the southern Caribbean region:

"... off the coast of Venezuela was discovered a hoard of Mediterranean coins with so many duplicates that it cannot well be a numismatist's collection but rather a supply of cash. Nearly all the coins are Roman, from the reign of Augustus to the 4th century CE. Two of the coins however, are Arabic of the 8th century CE. It is the latter that gives us the *terminus a quo* (i.e. time after which) of the collection as a whole (which cannot be earlier than the latest coins in the collection). Roman coins continued in use as currency into the medieval

times. A Moorish ship, perhaps from Spain or North Africa, seems to have crossed the Atlantic around 800 CE.¹⁵

The discovery of these coins adds validity to the reports, recorded by Muslim historians and geographers, concerning the journeys of Muslim adventurers and navigators across the Atlantic Ocean. In *Muruj ad-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al-Jawhar* (The Meadows of Gold and Quarries of Jewels) written around the year 956 CE, Abul Hasan 'Ali ibn al-Hussain ibn 'Ali al-Masudi, a historian, geographer, philosopher, and natural scientist¹⁶, wrote about a young man of Cordoba named Khashkhash ibn Saeed ibn Aswad who crossed the Atlantic Ocean, made contact with people on the other side, and returned in the year 889 CE. Al-Masudi wrote:

"Some People feel that this ocean is the source of all oceans and in it there have been many strange happenings. We have reported some of them in our book *Akhar az-Zaman*. Adventurers have penetrated it at the risk of their lives, some returning safely, others perishing in the attempt. One such man was an inhabitant of Andalusia named Khashkhash. He was a young man of Cordoba who gathered a group of young men and went on a voyage on this ocean. After a long time, he returned with a fabulous booty. Every Spaniard (Andalusian) knows his story.¹⁷"

A narration by Abu Bakr ibn 'Umar al-Qutiyya (not to be confused with the author of *Tarikh Iftitah al-Andalus*, Ibn al-Qutiyya) relates the story of Ibn Farrukh who landed in February 999 CE in Gando (Great Canary), visited King Guanariga and continued his journey westwards till he found islands he called Capraria and Pluitana. In May of that year he arrived back in Spain.¹⁸